

ELEMENTS: FIVE INSTALLATIONS

E L E M E N T S : F I V E I N S T A L L A T I O N S



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E L E M E N T S : F I V E I N S T A L L A T I O N S

Petah Coyne

Mineko Grimmer

Ann Hamilton

Eric Orr

Peter Shelton

Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center

December 7, 1987–January 27, 1988

Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

December 18, 1987–February 18, 1988

Design: Homans Design, Inc.
Typesetting: Trufont Typographers, Inc.
Printing: Eastern Press

Photographs by: Grey Crawford (Grimmer); David Grimes (Hamilton); Veronica Herman
(Coyne); Peter Kredenser, Inc. (Shelton).

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945 Madison Avenue
New York, New York 10021

This exhibition was organized by Kathleen Monaghan, Guest Curator.

Acknowledgments

This exhibition required the cooperation of a number of businesses and individuals. The Whitney Museum of American Art is indebted to all of them for their generosity and forbearance with this complex project. We extend our thanks to Karen Amiel, Modern and Contemporary Art, New York; Koplin Gallery, Los Angeles; L.A. Louver Gallery, Venice, California; Weiskopf & Pickworth Consulting Engineering; and Tishman-Speyer Building Management Corporation. Special recognition also goes to those who participated in the fabrication of the pieces and who helped complete the installation. We are especially grateful to our corporate sponsors—The Equitable and Philip Morris Companies Inc.—and to the staff of the Whitney Museum of American Art at both branches who graciously handled a myriad of details. Erika Wolf was responsible for research and curatorial assistance on this project.

My deep appreciation goes to the real heroes of the exhibition—the artists whose flexibility and willingness made it all possible.

K. M.

Elements: Five Installations

The works of the five artists represented in this exhibition are united by concept rather than visual similarity. Petah Coyne, Mineko Grimmer, Ann Hamilton, Eric Orr, and Peter Shelton are concerned with the harmony, balance, and process of natural elements and the contradictions found in nature itself. Although the works take many different forms, with references sometimes direct but often oblique, they all project a sense of the familiar and intimate. The materials used—water, air, light, stone, metal, wood—form part of our collective associations, our personal experiences and memories. By using phenomenological information about the universe, each of these artists has produced an independent language of feeling; they tell us something about ourselves, how we respond, and what happens in our real or imagined rapport with nature. As the works are both active and contemplative, the effects are physical as well as psychological. Instead of assuming the passive role of the observer, we become participants. Curiosity and a sense of adventure draw us irresistibly to each installation.

Petah Coyne assembles mud, straw, branches, and twigs into raw but organized structures. These bulbous shapes, which can hang from the ceiling or rest on the floor, seem to be the very essence of organic process. They remind us of an insect hive or bird's nest, a viscous oozing swamp, or the redolent floor of a deep forest. One imagines the work could have a life of its own and is perhaps inhabited by dense populations of small creatures. The pieces both attract and repel us: the sensuous surface is tactile and compelling, inviting our touch; we fear, however, either that such contact will destroy the form or that this mysterious entity will consume us. Coyne's works are completely void of nostalgia, and yet they evoke past experience. This is not the memory of a lonely train whistle in the night, but rather a feeling of pre-cultural existence. We somehow take comfort in the warmth and the bubbling, effluent nature of these forms.

In contrast, **Mineko Grimmer** works with subtle restraint in a minimal and refined manner. The mix of natural materials in *Symposium* (1987)—bamboo, ice, water, stones, pebbles—yields a metaphoric reading. A pyramidal ice cone filled with pebbles is suspended above a series of waving bamboo fingers. Large stones rest on wooden cages and act as ballast for the bamboo poles suspended over a shallow pool of water. The ice melts, slowly at first, releasing pebbles down through the bamboo thicket. The pebbles hit this series of poles suspended over the water before falling into the pool. The quality of the sounds created varies; a dull *thunk* from the bamboo, a lighter *plink/splash* as the pebbles drop into the water. This random falling of pebbles interrupts our contemplation of the work, and imposes a tension on the viewing experience: as we try to examine the intricate bamboo cage, we wait in frustration for the chance occurrence of a pebble dropping. Grimmer's work plays on anticipation and emphasizes cycles: of time, memory, seasons, and, ultimately, of human values.

The Earth Never Gets Flat, created by **Ann Hamilton**, is an installation/tableau. The disparate relationship between natural elements and culturally produced objects is the artist's allegory for "the psychological tug-of-war that often occurs in the perverse attempts we make to balance the desires and values of public life and the private world of fantasy." The list of objects in the work includes a dissecting table covered in vibrating water, a steel dolly precariously resting on a horizontal ramp, a slowly dying Ginkgo tree suspended parallel to the ceiling, and a seated figure in a grass-seed encrusted suit holding a metronome. The floor is covered by an ink drawing of an open book; its "text" replicates the linear patterns created by recording the sound of a human heartbeat. The gallery walls, covered in a mixture of paprika and cayenne pepper, are the color of human blood, connecting the dissecting table, the heartbeat lines, and the life-or-death struggle of the tree. As illusion and

reality compete, the viewer is confronted by metaphoric expressions of absurdity and dysfunction.

Eric Orr combines the ephemeral with the certain. A keen observer of human behavior, ritual, and ritualistic objects, Orr has studied with shamans in Africa and Oceania. It is not, however, ceremonial order that intrigues him; his preoccupation is with the power of thought and visual language, and he tries to inject that power into every idea. One part of the installation consists of two large gold panels, which Orr refers to as “light slices.” They extend from floor to ceiling, each panel bearing a hairline crack from which light emanates. On adjoining walls Orr has installed two bronze and gold wall pieces, his “space delineators.” The bronze-covered *Water Sculpture* sits in the center of the installation space, quietly trickling water. The entire atmosphere is mysterious and color-saturated, suggesting the rapturous light of dawn and dusk. From within the gallery, one sees *Double Vision*, a large, rectangular, room-size box with two viewing windows, filled with natural light, on opposite ends of the box. The interior is curved at all corners so that no edges or seams are apparent. The inner frames of the windows are beveled, a device that optically flattens the interior space. Looking through one window directly at the other, one perceives the objects beyond the far window as two dimensional. An oblique viewing point blocks the opposite window and reveals only what appears to be a light blue-gray, seamless sky. Orr leads the viewer beyond demonstrable scientific explanations for optical phenomena; he supersedes objective fact with personal vision. His work must be experienced directly, for without actual contact one can no more understand his originality than one can appreciate poetic imagery from the reading of critical exegeses.

Like Eric Orr, **Peter Shelton** tests our perception through the contrast of material and spatial relationships. Four large-scale sculptures which the artist has grouped in pairs, *HARDSTRETCH and droop* and *TUB, tubes and pipes*

(1987), are meant to stand as units, yet each object functions independently in relation to the space. The 30-foot-tall *HARDSTRETCH*, made of nickel-plated aluminum, rests on a stone base. Its 25-foot-long companion piece, *droop*, is cast in patinated bronze and hangs from the ceiling, hovering just above the floor. *TUB* is made of concrete and resembles a large cauldron; *tubes and pipes* is a series of patinated bronze objects resembling a pile of ancient bones. *Big Legs*, made of cast concrete, and *Shoes, Gloves*, made of cast iron, are somewhat closer to the scale of the human body; *Shoes, Gloves* is composed of “wearable” articles, but the absurdity of their cumbersome nature and weight makes us reconsider the object, its material, and relationship to the natural world. By virtue of their overall bulk and scale, these pieces almost overwhelm us. Yet Shelton’s sanguine approach to his materials and the environment charms us. The anthropomorphic forms are cheerful and confident, and the works are precisely crafted with an elegant and refined finish. Through contrast, Shelton has recreated that ancient battle between mind and matter on a grand scale.

With keen practical judgment, each of these artists draws upon the constants of nature and produces effects which transcend the object-oriented world. The result is like a fairy tale: the works enlarge our imagination, lift our spirit, and help us to escape and to understand. Like an ideal, endless childhood, our experience of the works knows no bounds. We need no resolution, nor a happy ending. Any threat implied by natural elements has been totally resolved by these artists; the effect is indeed magical.

Kathleen Monaghan

Guest Curator

Installations

The five installations in **Elements** were created specifically for this exhibition, although some incorporate preexistent works. For some installations, therefore, complete information was not available at the time of publication.



Petah Coyne

(b. 1953)

I believe that artists never have a choice in their selection of materials or their imagery—it just flows out of them. I would never consciously consider using my materials, they are too difficult to control, but I just gravitated to them. I want my images, which are highly personal, to have the same surprise and shock I find in nature.

Petah Coyne was born in Oklahoma and graduated from the Art Academy of Cincinnati. She has shown extensively in New York, as well as in galleries and museums across the country, and was recently included in an exhibition at Sala 1 in Rome. In addition to her gallery and museum exhibitions, the artist has completed several major outdoor public sculptures. In 1987 she received both a Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant and an Augustus Saint-Gaudens Memorial Fellowship. Coyne's work combines twigs, earth, and wood to create forms related to human figures, which she describes as self-images.

Untitled, 1987

A room of mixed-media sculptures composed of straw, wire, linen, branches, roots, polymer compound, orchid fiber, soil, mud mix, plaster, wax, and rope

Installed at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center



Mineko Grimmer

(b. 1949)

Culture can only be understood in relationship to the harmony and longevity of natural processes in the universe.

Mineko Grimmer, born in Hanamaki, Japan, received both her B.F.A. and M.F.A. from the Otis Art Institute of Parsons School of Design, Los Angeles. She also studied with composer Carl Stone. Grimmer's art is closely tied with her cultural heritage, employing simplicity, purity, and tranquility. Her work has been seen in both group and solo exhibitions at the University Art Gallery, San Diego State University; Oranges/Sardines Gallery, Los Angeles; The Design Center of Los Angeles; Santa Barbara Contemporary Arts Forum; The Japanese-American Cultural and Community Center, Los Angeles; Nohra Haime Gallery, New York; and the Koplin Gallery, Los Angeles. She is currently completing two major outdoor commissions.

Symposium, 1987

Bamboo poles, pebbles, rocks, wood basin, and wood supports

Installed at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center



Ann Hamilton

(b. 1956)

**The elements were something we learned about in science class.
We didn't understand what those charts had to do with the worlds
we created.
We wanted to dig to China without eating earth.
We knew fireflies wrote stories in the night air.
Then the crows came and made our territory theirs.
When I had trouble seeing they told me to breathe deeply.

We labor in the belief that magic exists.**

Ann Hamilton was born in Lima, Ohio, and is currently teaching at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She attended the University of Kansas and Ohio State University and received her M.F.A. from Yale University. She has completed installation projects, including "rites" at the Contemporary Arts Forum, Santa Barbara; "The Level of Volume," Carl Solway Gallery, Cincinnati; "the middle place" and "tangents," Maryland Institute, Baltimore; "Left Footed Measures," Yale University Art Gallery; and "The lids of unknown positions," Twining Gallery, New York. Her performance pieces have been seen at P.S. 122 and Franklin Furnace in New York City, and at San Jose State University. Hamilton's work contrasts nature with our man-made environment.

The Earth Never Gets Flat, 1987

A room of mixed-media found objects

Installed at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris



Eric Orr

(b. 1939)

**I've always wanted to make a work as simple as the concept of zero.
Death is my oldest friend.**

Eric Orr was born in Covington, Kentucky, and has attended the University of California, Berkeley; the University of Mexico, Mexico City; The New School for Social Research, New York; the École de Paraphysiques, Paris; and the University of Cincinnati. His work, centered on metaphysics, technology, and madness, has been included in international exhibitions in the Kunstmuseum Basel; the Venice Biennale; the Biennale of Sydney, Australia; Documenta 7, Kassel, West Germany; in Giza, Egypt; and at the Georges Lavroy Gallery, Paris. He has also exhibited extensively in California, Texas, and New Mexico. Orr currently resides in Venice, California.

Double Vision, 1987

Wood, plaster, paint, and scrim

Untitled (2 space delineators), 1987

Bronze and gold

Untitled (2 light slices), 1987

Gold and bronze

Water Sculpture, 1987

Wood, gold leaf, bronze, and water

Installed at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center



Peter Shelton

(b. 1951)

**I'm a little confused about whether the object is within or without.
Sculpture breaks the skin.**

Peter Shelton, born in Troy, Ohio, received his M.F.A. from the University of California, Los Angeles in 1979. He was the winner of the "Young Talent Award" from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1985. Shelton is best known for his installations of cast sculpture, which usually include figures or anthropomorphic forms. He has exhibited internationally in group shows in Italy, France, and Northern Ireland, as well as in various museums and galleries on both the East and West Coasts. In 1985 he completed a major commission, *floatinghouse DEADMAN*, for the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Shelton resides in Los Angeles.

Big Legs, 1983

Steel and cast concrete

Shoes, Gloves, 1983

Cast iron

HARDSTRETCH and droop, 1987

Nickel-plated aluminum; patinated bronze

TUB, tubes and pipes, 1987

Cast concrete; cast, patinated bronze

Installed at the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris

Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center

787 Seventh Avenue
New York, New York 10019
(212) 554-1000

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The Museum and its programs are funded by The Equitable.

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